DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 801 JC 020 315

AUTHOR Hanks, Joanna D.; Williamson, Fred H.
TITLE A House Divided: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.
PUB DATE 2002-00-00
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Role; *Community Colleges; *Corporate Education; Economic Development; *Educational Finance; Financial Needs; Financial Support; Fund Raising; *Labor Force Development; Labor Needs; Outcomes of Education; School Business Relationship; School Funds; Two Year Colleges; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the divisive issue of providing effective workforce development services from within a traditionally run academic institution. Over the years, state funding levels for community colleges have decreased dramatically. As a result, college presidents have had to become more adept at finding alternative sources of revenue. Many presidents have chosen to move into workforce training, since local employers offer money to fund specialized training designed to keep their employees at a competitive edge in the global economy. But presidents have found that their faculty are not necessarily enthusiastic about this turn of events. Therefore, many community colleges set up separate, market-driven workforce units, often as an extension of their existing continuing education function. The authors argue that many employees receive only technical education and lack the soft skills needed to move into managerial positions. In the old paradigm, this was addressed through general education. The authors suggest that now, however, community college presidents should look into building workforce development programs that can be easily re-integrated into the college mainstream. (NB)

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A House Divided:
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.

Joanna D. Hanks
Fred H. Williamson

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"A House Divided: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly"

Joanna D. Hanks and Fred H. Williamson

"This article is thought provoking and deserves to be widely read by those considering how to best align their institutions for effective workforce development."

Tony Zeiss, President
Central Piedmont Community College
Charlotte, North Carolina
Past Chair, AACC

It was President Abraham Lincoln, a very wise man indeed, who noted that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Lincoln only had the dissolution of the Union and a bloody civil war to be concerned about. Luckily for him but painfully for us, it falls to this generation to deal with the equally divisive issue of how to provide effective workforce development services from within a traditionally minded academic institution. For the most part, at least, this one has not involved actual combat, although some institutions have apparently come close, if one can believe tales told late at night around the bar at national conventions.

Looking into this situation reveals a number of assumptions that quickly evolve into contradictions. Should an academic institution be charged with providing workforce development services to its community? As Tony Carnevale and Donna Desrochers have ably pointed out in their excellent study done for AACC and ETS, the college community does not speak with a single voice on this subject. "Community colleges feel increasing pressure to provide short-term education and training, but it is a role at odds with many educators' views of the community college."(A. P Carnevale and D.M. Desrochers, Help Wanted, Credentials Required, 2001).

Over the years, state funding levels have shrunk dramatically. The State Science and Technology Institute recently reported in its January Update of the State Fiscal Outlook that all but five states are reporting smaller revenues than originally projected. These decreases have had a profound negative effect on state support to community colleges. As state support has continued to go south, college presidents have had to become more adept at finding alternative sources of revenue. Many presidents have apparently found the temptation to move into workforce training irresistible since local employers have offered real money to fund specialized training designed to keep their employees at the competitive edge in a global economy. Many also have found that their faculty never developed the same level of enthusiasm for this new potential source for paying the bills. On the other hand, neither did the faculty develop the enthusiasm and sense of responsiveness expected by the marketplace. As a consequence, many set up separate, market-driven workforce units within their colleges, often as an extension of their existing continuing education function.

There were at least two reasons why this seemed like a good idea at the time. First, was outright distaste on the part of many traditional academicians for having to modify both

content and delivery of courses that they had long ago developed to their own satisfaction and the apparent satisfaction of the many students who had taken those courses. Second was the fact that, even if willing to work closely with industry to meet their needs, most faculty had little to no actual workplace experience with industry and, accordingly, found it very difficult to understand requirements. Business people, on the other hand, used to working with knowledgeable suppliers, were unwilling to do much handholding for faculty beyond a couple of meetings to explain (quite adequately in their view, never having developed curricula) their training (not necessarily education) requirements.

What's a poor (literally) and besieged president to do? Drowning in deficits -- and by now having the legislators jump on the workforce bandwagon as a means of avoiding having to either raise taxes or cut funding elsewhere—they were not about to pass up a ready source of revenue and a ready source of increased importance in and service to their community. Having risen to their level on the strength of quick minds and bold strokes, many turned to their most entrepreneurial dean and told him/her to make workforce services a success. Said dean, given a broad charge and an empty checkbook, moved aggressively to do just that. After perhaps bending his/her lance a time or two trying to get faculty to do the "right thing" many simply avoided that problem by establishing a college within the college. By hiring, often on a part-time basis, industry retirees, industry training directors looking for a new challenge, former military instructors, and a small host of similar folk not expecting to teach in the morning and be gone the rest of the day, these new workforce leaders quickly established a great reputation for responsive, quality training and close, successful partnerships with growing, worker-starved employers. Sometimes, these partnerships became so close that money for specialized institutes and programs flowed into the college and the president was further proud of his/her great vision, leadership, and bold move.

So what's not to like? The faculty gets to do its traditional thing. The employers are paying handsomely for training that satisfies their needs—and we all know about the left hand and the right hand not knowing (or sometimes caring) what each other is doing. This dichotomy has created some ugly weeds in this Garden of Good and Evil but, unfortunately, they don't always show up until the college has gone pretty far down this path and the realization begins to creep in that perhaps they have become a victim of their own success.

These nagging doubts have their origin in a most interesting quarter: employers. Not that they aren't satisfied with the quality and responsive training programs provided by the college. They should be. They get to make input in designing the courses, often the instructors are from industry or chosen with their input, and management can easily show a positive return on investment.

One of the nagging problems relates to career progression. Employers are finding that employees with excellent technical skills but little or none of the requisite people and business skills run out of gas when put into a management or supervision role. "Hey, man, I already showed you this stuff once," might work for "supervision" on technical matters but will hardly do the job on project management, customer relations and the like.

Employees who in their early 20's felt that $40K a year was all the money in the world find out when they have acquired a mortgage, a minivan and kids who "need" designer jeans and $150 basketball shoes, that they need more. The path to a significantly higher salary is supervision and management and even smaller, highly technical companies often want degreed individuals in those positions. From the employer's perspective, our new "techie" must not only be prepared to move into supervision or management someday but will also need those higher order skills necessary—a requirement in degree programs--to keep pace with and adapt successfully to changes in the field brought about by new techniques and new technologies.

The other and related problem is recruiting. In a tight labor market, characterized by a distinct lack of employee loyalty, corporate training programs that are too proprietary and too vendor specific (unless they are tied to a recognized industry certification) may not be portable and therefore not attractive to a generation that feels responsible for its own career development. Credit programs, on the other hand, bear at least a presumption of transferability and the capability to be fit into a degree program with more widely recognized value, at some point.

So now where do we find ourselves? Back to Mr. Lincoln's house divided. Having developed excellent specialized workforce programs that allow the college to put its best foot forward, we are in a situation that requires us to quickly move both feet forward in a seamless, integrated fashion that provides our customers with a complete menu of potential solutions to their education and training needs. Anything less tends to confuse the customers, convince them we don't have our act together and underestimate how well they can see inside the ivy-covered walls. Worst of all, we run the risk of leaving the academic part of the solution out of the workforce problem and does that not strike you as just a bit paradoxical for institutions of higher learning?

Seeing the workforce folks with more ready cash, better marketing materials, nicer rented space in corporate business parks (as opposed to the early prison-break style of architecture and construction that most state general services agencies seem to favor for community college campuses) causes jealousies and internal debates that waste time and energy. One of the more amusing results is to hear division and department chairs that once seemed firmly in the Mugwump camp now claiming that we are all doing workforce development. They are, of course, absolutely right --- or should be. Collectively, community colleges have been in the workforce development and aspiration-meeting business for their hundred years of existence. What those newly converted to this realization need to help us all figure out is how we turn that rich tradition and tremendous talent pool into a responsive instrument that brings all of our college's capabilities into play in a timely and responsive fashion. It definitely won't be a business-as-usual solution, but it is critical to ensuring that the house stands. Not only stands but also continues to have the wherewithal necessary to provide service to and educational opportunities for the deserving and the challenged, as well as training and retraining and other lifelong learning for others.

Once more into the fray, our president decides that it is time to call in a few chips from his new best friends among community and business leaders and get a clear picture of what the real needs are. Not surprisingly, he or she gets the kind of advice one often gets for free. "You can't possibly be good at everything, so do a few things really well but in the process be sure you take care of all the workforce needs and don't neglect general education because that's where the college makes a great contribution to raising the overall level of the community and that's probably where our next generation of K-12 teachers is coming from." Biting his/her tongue, our beleaguered president feels like saying, "Thanks, folks, but I was hoping you'd noticed that's exactly what I was doing before the budget crisis and still would be doing if the governor hadn't run out of money. What I was looking for was a new idea." To add to the joy of the moment, just about everyone in the service region who has been laid off or who thinks they might be starts showing up to register for more education.

Time for another bold stroke. Borrowing an idea from the senior institutions, he/she decides to establish schools aligned with each of the major industries in the region which are in serious need of trained workers or which anticipate that they soon will be as identified in the college's strategic planning process. To give these schools some chance of having sufficient funding to be truly successful and also to give them all of the pieces of the solution including adequate infrastructure, he/she combines credit and non-credit instruction under each school director. She/he also establishes a School of Arts and Sciences to address the general education issue. When this approach is tried out at the Chamber of Commerce, all of those free consultants say: "Oh yeah, great job. That's just what we had in mind." When tried out on the general public, it quickly becomes clear that this structure has real value in making the college seem less amorphous and its mission and functions more clearly understood. The greatest value, however, is that it erases some heretofore hard and divisive boundaries between elements of the college that should have been working closely together to meet community needs. Thus we have a new entity: the "Boundaryless College.™"

Our president is still not sleeping easily the whole night through, however. There are real concerns that the existing workforce revenues, expertise, and relationships not be lost in the changeover. After all, the goal is to address the funding situation and improve service, not just redraw boxes (which he/she hates to do, anyway, because somebody always gets upset). He/she tries to make it absolutely clear that the new schools must demonstrate a positive, responsive attitude on day one, must have a clear strategy for approaching their respective marketplaces and must provide an integrated credit, non-credit and industry certifications offering right out of the box. Over time, the schools will have to develop competencies in a number of areas necessary to help them grow their businesses and improve both the quantity and quality of offerings. Some of these competencies are already present among the existing workforce development staff and one of the critical tasks is to carefully apportion these folks amongst the new schools in order to leaven the more traditionally minded academics that still comprise the major portion of the school's staffing. Additionally, the workforce leadership is retained to serve in an advisory, consulting role during the changeover

The bottom line, then, on this workforce development issue is to be careful what you ask for because you really might get it. Be very careful about establishing a separate, standalone workforce program; but, if you must, take care that you assemble it in such a manner that it can be easily re-integrated into the college mainstream. Also, ensure that the lessons learned (often the hard way) by the hard-chargers in the workforce program find their way back into that mainstream. Community colleges have always been distinguished by their affordability, convenience and responsiveness to community needs (as defined by the community, incidentally). While the first of these characteristics is often out of our control with state-mandated tuition and fee ceilings, the latter two are entirely within our control. They will take, however, strong leadership to "sell" internally and to be reflected in everybody's attitude toward service delivery.

Anything less, believe it or not, leads straight to irrelevance and that is an ugly place. It could even be a cold, quiet, and dark place if it should lead to layoffs and an inability to maintain the quality of the educational experience our colleges provide. In the final analysis, establishing a structure that will allow us to be responsive to community needs, especially those of the business community, which is often one of the more vocal segments of the constituency, while also infusing a new spirit (and some much-needed funding) into other critical parts of the mission, is all about survival. There is nothing good about failure to survive.

Developing a strong program of corporate education and training is a sine qua non of a successful and relevant community college in today's world of rapid shifts in technology and business position. This article suggests a model that allows each institution to bring all of its resources to bear on the issue of workforce development in the most effective manner. The model is distinctive because of its complete integration. It is not a "work around" or a piece-meal solution as are so many others. It is a straightforward approach to providing your workforce customers the very best you have to offer.

Hanks and Williamson are, respectively, Dean of the College and Dean for Workforce Development at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond, Virginia. They are also principals in Hanks-Williamson & Associates, a management consulting firm that specializes in organizational change and renewal.

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Signature:	Printed Name/Position/Title: J. D. Hanks, Dean of the College F. H. Williamson, Dean for Workforce Development	
Organization/Address: J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College P.O. Box 85622 Richmond, VA 23285-5622	Telephone: 804 371-3202	FAX: 371
	E-Mail Address: jhanks@jsr.vccs.edu fhw@jsr.vccs.edu	Date: